

Pallas's Bunting *Emberiza pallasii*: a new species for Nepal and the Indian subcontinent

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On 13 January 1994, I was birding along the east side of the Kosi river, north of the dam at Kosi Barrage, eastern Nepal. I was scrutinizing some Paddyfield Warblers *Acrocephalus agricola* and Blyth's Reed Warblers *A. dumetorum* in the waterside vegetation, when a bunting *Emberiza* appeared out of the early-morning mist and dropped into the reeds, directly in front of me. I was able to watch the bird, at reasonably close range through a telescope, for approximately 10-15 minutes. During this time, I managed to obtain a couple of photographs (Fig. 1).

Based on the few pertinent features that I could recall from the literature, I tentatively identified the bird as a Pallas's Bunting *Emberiza pallasii* and I took a full plumage description. This bird was presumably the same bird that had been seen the previous day, south of the barrage, by Paul Derbyshire, Dave Andersen and myself — though I had only seen the bird in flight. The other two had thought that the bird must be a Pallas's Bunting, but their views and descriptions had been inconclusive. We had searched the general area, but the bird was never relocated. Reference to Inskipp and Inskipp (1991) indicated that Pallas's Bunting had not been recorded in Nepal and that there was only one record of Reed Bunting *E. schoeniclus*.

The main identification problem was separating Pallas's Bunting from Reed Bunting in plumages other than adult male. The following discussion relates to this aspect of identification, particularly females in winter-plumage.

Though the overall 'frosty' appearance, bland head-pattern and small bill (with a straight culmen) were indicative of Pallas's Bunting, I did have some reservations about the identification, mainly due to a lack of field experience, but also because the problem is compounded by the following:

- Reed Bunting and Pallas's Bunting are very similar and both can show extensive individual variation.
- The eastern race of Reed Bunting was inadequately documented in the literature to allow reliable separation from Pallas's.
- Western forms of Reed Buntings can, occasionally, superficially resemble Pallas's.

On returning to England, a search of photographs and the current literature, seemed to support the identification.

Based on identification criteria given by Alström and Olsson (1994), the most important Pallas's Bunting features shown by our bird were as follows:

- Small, triangular bill, with a near-straight culmen and a pale base to the lower mandible.
- Bland head-pattern and crown — not showing any well-defined lateral or median crown-stripes.
- Well-streaked, 'frosty' mantle with pale, contrasting 'tramlines'.



Figure 1. Pallas's Bunting *Emberiza pallasii*, Kosi Barrage, Nepal, January 1994.

- Finely streaked, grey-brown rump.
- Pale flesh-brown legs.
- Small and 'dainty' appearance.

The best identification feature of Pallas's Bunting, the colour of the lesser coverts, could not be determined. However, though these coverts are notoriously difficult to see in the field, there was no indication of an obvious rufous or chestnut colour on this part of the wing of the Kosi bird.

However, there were several points in the literature which slightly contradicted the identification as Pallas's, notably that the supercilium on our bird was quite distinct (described as usually indistinct or lacking on Pallas's), and it did not appear long-tailed in the field (Pallas's are said to be slightly longer-tailed than Reed).

Eliminating eastern races of Reed Bunting initially proved problematical, mainly due to a vacuum in the literature addressing this particular pitfall. However, a timely paper describing the identification of these two species, by Per Alström and Urban Olsson, appeared in February 1994. In that article, all the eastern races of Reed Bunting were described as being generally similar to the western forms of Reed in size and plumage tones, therefore being larger and more contrasting than a typical Pallas's. Although there is some racial and individual variation (with some eastern Reed Buntings resembling Pallas's), there are two important points to evaluate when separating these two species. The edges of the wing-coverts of eastern Reeds are described as warm, or chestnut brown and the birds usually appear stouter, or bigger-billed, lacking a distinct pale base, and have — most importantly — a convex-shaped culmen. Pallas's Buntings generally lack the warm chestnut tones, the edges of the wing-coverts being paler, showing as two pale wing-bars on the median and greater coverts.

In the field, and from the photographs, the Kosi bird clearly had a small bill with a straight-shaped culmen and it can be seen to lack warm brown tones to the wing-coverts, showing instead two pale wing-bars – both good Pallas's Bunting features.

Assessing the points 'for' and 'against', it would seem that the majority of features support the identification as a Pallas's. Although the prominent supercilium and fine flank streaking were initially troubling the identification, subsequent field experience of many Pallas's Buntings in China in May 1995 showed that some females, particularly first-years, exhibited both these features.

This constitutes the first record for Nepal and the Indian subcontinent. The species breeds from north-east European Russia east to the Chukotskiy peninsula and south to the Tien Shan; it winters in China, Korea, south-east Russia and Japan (Byers *et al.* 1995). Vagrants have been recorded from Hong Kong (8-14 December 1991: Leader 1992), Maymyo, Myanmar (22 March 1902: Colston 1978), Fair Isle, U.K. (29 September - 11 October 1976: Broad and Oddie 1980, 17-18 September 1981: Riddiford and Broome 1983), Sussex,

U.K. (17 October 1990: Rogers *et al.* 1994) and Alaska, U.S.A. (11 June 1968, 28 May 1973: AOU 1983).

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A high-altitude breeding record of *Besra Accipiter virgatus*

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On 16 June 1996, at about 07h00, I was birding in the 'Primeval Forest' (a local name) about 35 km S of the resort of Jiuzhaigou (103°50'E 33°15'N) in the Min Shan (= Min Range), Sichuan Province, China. The forest (at about 3,300 m) is closed-canopy, relatively even-aged, Dragon Spruce *Picea asperata* to ca. 40 m, with a thin understorey of birch *Betula* and cherry *Prunus* over a substratum of mosses covering rocks and fallen timber. The forest is largely undisturbed by humans or domestic animals.

A long descending scream attracted my attention. On approaching the source, a small male *Accipiter* flew towards me and perched, for 45 min, in a variety of locations down to 15 m distance, during which time I could watch it continuously through 10x binoculars. During this period I scanned nearby trees and found a nest about 40 cm wide, untidily composed of twigs approximately 2 cm in diameter, positioned ca. 20 m up a spruce, pressed close to the trunk in a fork of the tree. A female *Accipiter* was on the nest. She did not move for 40 min, and I obtained views at 25 m distance.

The male was very small, with body length not over 25 cm, as judged by comparison with the limbs upon which he perched. In flight, the wings appeared short

and rounded. The back, visible flight feathers, and visible wing-coverts, were grey with an element of brown, most marked on the crown. There was a prominent white nape spot. The iris was deep red. The cere was yellow and the rest of the bill dark. The throat was off-white with a prominent thick mesial stripe. The ear-coverts were chestnut-orange, and this colour continued onto the breast, belly and flanks. On the flanks and belly, the colour broke into thick bars, separated by thin off-white bars. The legs were yellow and the claws black. The uppertail was grey with four darker transverse bars, each about 30% thicker than the intervening paler bars. The undertail was grey-brown. There was no white tail tip and no contrasting supercilium. The underwings were seen only briefly; they appeared white with darker barring and did not show any contrast between the tips of the flight feathers and the rest of the underwing.

The female was noticeably bigger, with body length perhaps 30% larger than the male, and was seen well only on the nest. The upperparts were grey-brown, lighter than the male. There was no nape spot. The ear-coverts were grey-brown. There was a very prominent, sharply defined white supercilium. The iris was bright yellow. The cere was yellow and the rest of the bill dark.